



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Manuel Barandas

October 7, 1996

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Araceli Perez: This is Araceli Lanza Perez and I'm at the home of Mr. Manuel Barandas, October 7, 1996, and this is the Oral History of South Natomas Project. Manuel, I'd like to ask you about when you came to Natomas. What year was that? How did you come about moving to Natomas?

[00:00:25]

Manuel Barandas: The year was 1927 and my dad got a steady job working with the Natomas Company. He was able to find a house here, so we moved from the city of Sacramento out into the country, and have been living here ever since.

Araceli: So, he worked for the Natomas Company, he wasn't a farmer?

Manuel: At that time, no. He didn't start farming until later on.

Araceli: So where did your parents come from?

Manuel: My parents came from Portugal, the mainland of Portugal in Europe.

Araceli: When did they come to this country?

Manuel: My dad came in 1916 and I believe my mom came in about 1917.

Araceli: So not long before they moved here. So, they still spoke Portuguese at home when you were a child?

Manuel: Yes, all the time.

Araceli: What was your family like when you were a little boy? What do you remember about growing up?

[00:01:27]

Manuel: In those days it was the family had strong ties, the neighbors and such. They were very close knitted. The neighbors were there for you in times when you needed help.

Araceli: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Manuel: I have one brother and three sisters. I'm the oldest.

Araceli: were you all born in the United States?

Manuel: That's right. All born in the city of Sacramento.

Araceli: Being from the old country, did your parents continue any of the traditions from Portugal here in the United States?

Manuel: I think they kept the food, they had their own neighborhoods and they had traditions. They still came to some of the traditions from the old country like their festas and dances. We would gather on Saturday and the young children would dance in the Portuguese folk dances and sing the Portuguese folk songs. It was kind of interesting.

Araceli: And you mentioned the food?

Manuel: Yes, they had bacalhau, which is actually dried codfish, and they were heavy on pork. They would always butcher hogs in the wintertime, and smoked some of the meat and salted some of the meat. Of course, in those days there was no freezers or stuff to preserve, so they had to use the means they had, and that's what they did. They also had gardens and picked up fruit. They did a lot of canning, an awful lot of canning. They pretty much supplied themselves with food for the wintertime.

Araceli: Were there any stores where they could buy Portuguese food?

[00:03:33]

Manuel: Not ex— There's still some stores around that they can buy Portuguese bread and they can buy linguica, which is Portuguese sausage, and they also have a blood sausage they can buy. Sardines, they're still available. San Jose has a couple of stores, I understand, where they have these people who buy and they peddle around items that you can buy. They mostly go where gatherings are coming out, like when you get out of church, and they will be selling like from the back of a pickup.

Araceli: When you were a little boy you went to school here in Natomas. Is that correct?

Manuel: Correct.

Araceli: Now where was that school?

Manuel: It would be at what they now call San Juan Road and Orchard Lane, right on the intersection.

Araceli: Jefferson School.

Manuel: Jefferson School, correct.

Araceli: And what was that like?

[00:04:30]

Manuel: It was strange. I was born in the city, lived in the city all the time, had sidewalks and streets and stuff. I moved out here. I had done one year in town school, Lincoln School, quite a big school. My dad had given me directions on how to get to this school. I followed his direction and came up to this building, a beautiful little building, like home. It had a fence around it, it did have a flagpole. It had little gardens which we never saw in schoolyards. I thought, oh, I'm lost. I don't even know where to go. I'm lost I'll just sit here. Somebody will come by. So, sure as heck, here comes a farmhand with a team of horses. I stopped him. In those days I spoke Portuguese real well. Of course, kids were well-mannered in those days. "Good morning, sir. I think I'm lost. I'm looking for the school." He says, "I think I know you." I said, "I'm sorry sir, I don't know you." He says, "You're Johnny's boy. You just moved out here." I said "yes." He says, "Just stay right there, that's the school right there." What went through my mind, country boy taking advantage of the city guy. I could just see it. I thought oh my gosh, I'm not going in

that little gate yet and walk in. I sat there. In come some kids, so I said, "Where's the school?" They said, "Right here." So, I said to myself, well I guess this has to be it. Then a kid came up on a horse, and another on a horse, western-style. I thought, oh my. That was my first day of school. I thought, what a weird place to be. One teacher, one room, no electricity. Each of the older boys had chores. One would put up the flag, another would start the pump for water, another, in the wintertime, would haul the coal for the potbelly stove to heat the room. That was it. I'd say eighty percent were Portuguese and the teacher was Portuguese. It was really neat!

Araceli: The school was in English though.

[00:07:18]

Manuel: The school was in English.

Araceli: Orchard Lane is a little far from here isn't it? How did you get to school?

Manuel: I didn't live on Orchard Lane. I walked about three miles to school.

Araceli: How did you get there in the winter when it rained?

Manuel: Just walked to school. I remember – it's strange – it's just like it was yesterday. I put a perfect semester in, a perfect year of school. I never missed a day of school. Sometimes the road was so muddy the teacher didn't make it. Of course, we'd have to walk back. Every day I was there at school.

Araceli: It looks like you enjoyed it!

Manuel: I did. It was fun! There was a lot of people to the school. We kept close. Maybe ten years ago we started what we call the Jefferson School Reunion. Everyone that went to that school got together. I believe it was the greatest day of my life seeing people you hadn't met since — I graduated in '35. Some before me and some after me. It was neat! I had a really good time. Everybody was well mannered. Everybody respected everybody; that was one thing about it.

Araceli: Does that school still exist?

Manuel: No. It has been demolished.

[00:08:45]

Araceli: So then after school did you have to come home and do any work?

Manuel: Yes, there were chores to be done. There was hogs to be fed. There was different things. I guess I was about 8 years old and I got in the habit of raising rabbits. It was my job to take care of them in the morning and in the evening. I kept track of when they were born and when they were bred. Different stuff. There was a fellow who raised rabbits. He had some fancy things. I go over there and beg him. I'd trade him three of my rabbits for one of his, or something like that. It was really neat!

Araceli: Were you also farming or was it mostly animals?

Manuel: No. My dad started farming full time in '35.

Araceli: How old were you then?

Manuel: I was 16.

Araceli: Until that time you just had animals at home?

Manuel: Well, he did it part time. We had a cow, a lot of hogs, and some horses to do the work. He farmed just part time. Then in '35 he went to full time farming.

Araceli: Did he buy the land?

Manuel: No, he rented the land.

Araceli: How did he take care of it? How would he irrigate it? Did he have to?

Manuel: Oh, he had to buy some equipment, and we'd irrigate it. He had pumps. There's areas in the district you get what they call service water, where they supply the water to you, in the corner of the field then you take care of it. There's other places where you have wells, or otherwise you pump it to the land out of the ditches, different situations.

Araceli: Did he buy the land later on?

Manuel: He bought land in the '40s. He started buying land in the '40s.

Araceli: Is that this?

Manuel: This is my land. No, I bought this in '48. Built this house here.

Araceli: Oh.

Manuel: I had this house built.

Araceli: It's beautiful.

[00:10:45]

Araceli: What effect did the wars and the depression have on life here in Natomas?

Manuel: I was awful young in the depression. It was just an awful lot of people lost their homes, they lost their properties. Then the war come, prices picked up some, everybody had a job. Values went up toward the end of the war. That's about what happened there. The Natomas Company owned at one time all the land and leased it out to different farmers. They'd manage it. They worked on a percentage of the crop, if you had beans or alfalfa. There were two fellows that is what they did. They would check out if you did your job and then they would report back to the headquarters.

[00:11:50]

Araceli: You've seen a lot of changes in Natomas.

Manuel: Yes. Since I guess the biggest change was when the airport came in. That was a big change. Freeways and airport came in about the same time. Of course, they subdivided South Natomas. There was a big turnover. But there still is a lot of land in farms. I guess from my standpoint the biggest change I saw is in the methods of farming. Say in the '40s, 50 years ago to today there is just a complete turnaround. Mechanical now. You had a lot more help than you do today. I think you did the community a favor hiring people, school kids and stuff. I'll never forget the time when I had this little black boy working for me picking tomatoes. We paid daily; had a cashier on the job. He had just gotten paid. His dad commented to me that he sure wanted to meet the guy that hired his son to work because it was the first year he had gone to school with new clothes and new shoes. I felt really good about that; it made me feel really, really good. He did a really good job. Then the laws changed about child labor. It wasn't hourly labor, it was piecemeal. They only did as much as they wanted. I recall one woman who worked for me, she had two little children. She would just work until eleven o'clock and then go home to make her husband's lunch. She would make about \$30 a day, which in those days was quite a bit of money. Probably she was making more money than her husband was making. It was nice. Things changed; not always for the better either. Something like that, I always felt like the community gave something to me and it felt good to be able to give back to the community in these ways. Kids needed to do something. Let them learn work habits, that's what I'm saying. Better than stealing hubcaps.

[00:14:53]

Araceli: So back then farming involved the whole community more than now which is just a lot of machinery.

Manuel: it required a lot of help. When you were harvesting 300 acres of tomatoes, it was not uncommon to have 150 people out there. At harvest time you would have, for sure, 20 people out there. That's what I'm getting at. Changes.

Araceli: Do you remember when McClellan Air Force Base was built?

Manuel: Early '40s or so.

[00:15:44]

Araceli: Do you remember when the planes were brought in?

Manuel: All the way through the war. All the way through the war. They would pick up the damaged ones from barges at the dock. Cranes would pick them up and set them on the dock and then they'd tow them to McClellan Field. They'd bring the repaired ones to the dock. The repaired ones were all covered in a plastic cover. They were sealed to protect them from water damage, salt water. They'd tow them with the wings on, fighter planes. The big bombers they'd tow with the wings off. They widened Garden Highway in a certain area. They'd stop traffic so they could tow them. That's what they did.

Araceli: Sort of comical to see planes being towed down the street.

Manuel: Two or three times a week.

[00:17:08]

Araceli: The Jibboom Street bridge made for some changes in Natomas, didn't it?

Manuel: The Jibboom Street bridge prior to I-5. Prior to the Jibboom Street bridge, you had to go down to Northgate, go across a flat plain, cross, then go in to 12th and 16th streets, both two-way streets. That's how you got to town. Then they built Jibboom. No one knew where Natomas was. Then I-5 came in, a whole new ballgame. Well, the old bridge is still there going into Discovery Park. That's the old bridge, that part of the road.

Araceli: How about the subdivisions in Natomas?

Manuel: Well, you live with them. I believe I remember the Northgate subdivision. I believe it was '52 when they did that, where Lucky's is at. On the west side of Northgate was Smythe School and Rio Tierra School. Fellows by the name of Carl Cook, Artz and Cook were the developers there. Later on they built over here. That was some of the original stuff in Natomas and it's been coming ever since.

[00:19:08]

Araceli: Do you remember the flood of February of '86?

Manuel: I was involved in that. It was no flood.

Araceli: A near flood.

Manuel: Yes, that's right, a near flood. I received a call at 5 o'clock in the morning. There were 5 trustees on the RD 1000 Board. One of the trustee's wives called me to tell me her husband was out on the levee; they were having trouble on the levee. Just like that. Dick Wiley was up there and wanted some help to see what we could do. So, I did. I got up there. It was pretty dangerous. So, we left there and went back to the office to have a quick meeting about what we were going to do. We made up our mind that we were going to just do the best that we could do. So, we set up committees; there were five of us. You take this, you take that. One guy's job was to round up all the trucks he could find. Another guy's job was to get on the phone and call all the gravel pits that were around here so that we could get in and out as fast as we could. So, we did that. Soon we had a string of trucks. We called emergency services and got some input from them. This was all started at 5 o'clock and by 9 o'clock we got trucks on the road. We didn't worry about hiring drivers; anyone of us could drive a truck. 11 o'clock that same morning we signed a contract with the Corps of Engineers and they let the contract out – Teichert Engineers started. But that's how fast we work. The problem came to our attention at 5 o'clock, we had trucks on the road by 9 o'clock and had a contract by 11 o'clock. That's what I tell city folk; farmers, when it comes time to plow, we plow. We don't have hearings, sessions, or whatever; we plow. Really it was important we did it that fast. Myself and a highway patrolman were setting on top of the asphalt of the road; actually the base was concrete. All the roads at first were concrete. Well the dirt was just kind of slipping away like that. I presume a big slab would just break off and water would just come in. That's how dangerous it was getting. We were able to hold it. We'd had some experience with that stuff before. It was something else! I was in on that one.

[00:22:22]

Araceli: Were there some people who were evacuated at that time?

Manuel: That's true. We never sent word out about evacuations, the people that were on the job. The county was there. Some fire department from up, I don't know where, got ahold of the news media that the levee was broke and started evacuation. It didn't.

Araceli: But really it didn't. There really was never a flood because you fortified the levee.

Manuel: Never flooded. There was water on the ground, but it was rainwater. The levee did not let go. There was water coming through in a gap up the road, on Main Ave, but not actually a levee letting go. Communication broke down somewhere, and that can happen.

Araceli: Was that the worst experience you've had with the river?

Manuel: Of course not.

[00:23:27]

Araceli: So what other things can you remember about Natomas that you'd like to share with us?

Manuel: The first thing, growing up in the country is great. I'll say that for it. Today we don't have as many people growing up in the country, and you can tell it. People growing up in the country have a respect for one another. I went to school with this woman, my sons went to school with her children and my grandchildren went to school with her grandchildren. Three generations going to school together. You respect people, that's all there is to it. When was the last time you see a teenager going up to an older person and say, "Hello, Mr. Smith, or Mr. Jones"? Instead, "Hey you, what are you doing Joe, or Chad," or something like that? You didn't do those things. That was a no-no. You treated everyone "Sir" or "Ma'am." It wasn't hard to do. At first when you had to do it — but after a while it just came natural. It's just different. I remember one day when I wasn't that young anymore, I was talking to this guy, we were negotiating a deal. I said, "Mr. So and So," he said, "Who are you talking to?" He said, "My name's Ed." It was so easy to say "Mr. Jones" or "Mr. Smith," and so we all did it. Families broke up. They're not the same as they were before. I'm not going to point fingers at this or point fingers at that. And then you talk about alcoholic; when I grew up there were two pitchers on the table, one pitcher of wine and one pitcher of milk. Take your choices. Got three sisters, they never drank a bit after they left home. I drank a beer, not a lot, or stuff like that. I look back, of all the people I grew up with, not a one was an alcoholic. Not a one. Very few smokers either; you got that too. We were not denied. I don't say we were denied. Where is the breakdown? My wife, she was born out here, she's been living here all her life.

Araceli: Is your family or your children out here in this area?

Manuel: They live close by, they're not in the area. I have one boy who has been in Europe for five, six years. He just got back. He works for the telephone company. He works with cellular phones. Yes, cellular phones. But anyhow, none of them live in the country. Our youngest boy used to live in that house over there. But, he went through divorce and sold the house. He lives in the Northgate area now. They're close by, but not here. We have nine grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

Araceli: Well, thank you very much.